



Curved heir

With a softer look and loftier ambitions **David Vivian** listen in to Dynaudio's new standmount to see if it hits the mark

For many manufacturers, evolution is a handy concept. It means that, like nature, your product line can progress in baby steps, making incremental improvements without putting undue strain on resources. It's a way of doing business we, as hi-fi consumers, are used to and comfortable with, if seldom startled by.

It would be fair to say Danish speaker brand Dynaudio has adopted this approach over the years with much success. But just occasionally – and because, unlike some smaller

operations, it can afford to – it goes for the other, far more radical and costly option. Revolution.

With the new Contour range, the initiative is partly literal. The distinctive bass-above-treble driver configuration of the now superseded Contour S series has been flipped 180°, so the tweeter's back on top, as it was in earlier versions of the range. In other respects, the new models look conservative by the standards of their immediate predecessors. Like the previous Contour, the prominence given to the baffle is hard to miss.

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT

Dynaudio
Contour 20

ORIGIN

Denmark

TYPE

2-way standmount
loudspeaker

WEIGHT

15.5kg

DIMENSIONS

(WxHxD)
215 x 440 x 360mm

FEATURES

- 1x 28mm Esotar² fabric soft dome tweeter
- 1x 180mm vari-MSP mid/bass driver
- Quoted sensitivity 86dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR

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So what we have isn't a cosmetic makeover. Dynaudio sees it as nothing less than a deep dive re-evaluation of the range that has been with it from the very beginning in 1977 and now neatly bridges the gap between its highest-end speakers and more affordable offerings. True, the cost has risen. The £3,750 Contour 20 standmount here is exactly £1,000 more than the Contour S 1.4 LE (HFC 408) it replaces. But the justification is a claimed major step up in performance.

Designed and manufactured in its entirety at Dynaudio's new research facility and factory in Denmark, the new range also has two floorstanders, the Contour 30 (£5,750) and 60 (£7,500), and a centre speaker for home cinema setups, the Contour 25C (£2,750). Nothing has been carried over from the old Contour S series, but cannily Dynaudio's best tweeter, the 28mm Esotar²-coated fabric soft dome, has been pinched from the Confidence and Evidence

high-enders, both as a key element in the new design and, from a marketing perspective, to sprinkle a little stardust over a substantially upgraded range.

Intended specifically for the new generation Contour, however, is the '18W55' 180mm Finite Element Method (FEM) optimised main driver. All new are the alloy basket, the vented dual-ferrite magnet system, the spider suspension and the rubber surround. The lightweight aluminium voice coil has a large 30mm centre vent and a 24 percent taller winding, claimed to give 70 percent greater excursion than the voice coil used in previous models. The new coil also has a built-in ventilation system that allows air to escape without

There's lots of finely resolved detail through both the midrange and treble

obstructions and lets the cone move more freely. The cone is made from Magnesium Silicate Polymer (vari-MSP), a material introduced by the company in 1985. It's claimed to achieve a virtuous trinity of low mass, high rigidity and optimum internal damping, while the new 'vari' bit refers to its critically varied thickness across the diaphragm's surface to further finesse the control of the driver. The second order crossover network uses ultra-high-quality Mundorf capacitors and is supported by a brand new wiring configuration.

The drivers are mounted in a solid aluminium baffle, although the effect is softened by the more conventionally pyramidal driver placement and the baffle's soft sheen finish, while the shape of the baffle is more contoured and no longer extends, shield-like, beyond the edges of the cabinet. Also, the Contour 20 is a much larger and heavier affair than the old Contour S 1.4 LE, so the baffle-to-cabinet ratio is more balanced and looks good. A beefy baffle should be good news sonically, of course, not least because it provides a firm foundation for the drivers to do their work, the hoped-for upshot being improved high-volume performance, especially at low frequencies. Care has also been taken to chamfer the additional plating surrounding the tweeter with the stated aim of reducing unwanted high-frequency diffraction effects for a clearer, better dispersed treble performance.

As well as being larger than the one it replaces, the Contour 20's cabinet

is a lot curvier and, in the flesh, a thing of borderline magnificence. Photographs really don't do the satin white oak finish of the review pair justice. In the flesh, you're in for a visual and tactile treat. And it's only when you lift one up that you fully appreciate just how solid, inert and precisely put together it is. Each speaker weighs a very substantial 15.5kg and I'm not in the least surprised that the build process takes three weeks – a state-of-the-art CNC milling machine with special five-axis cutting heads, some serious carpentry skills and the application of what must be the finest-grade sandpaper ever devised.

Beneath all the final-stage pampering, there's an extremely strong rear bass reflex ported box with diffraction-minimising curved edges constructed from multiple layers of MDF that have been glued and then pressed together under high pressure. The back plate, on which is fixed a single pair of high-quality binding posts, is a whopping 38mm thick and the 16mm side walls are hardly flimsy. Internal bracing is placed as close to the drivers as possible to reduce resonance and resulting box-contributed colouration. In addition there are MDF dampening plates with KERF cuts that, in conjunction with the thickness of the cabinet panels, are claimed to help break up and absorb unwanted sound waves at the back of the enclosure. There are two satin finishes – white oak and walnut – but if you prefer high gloss you can choose from the usual black or white piano lacquer, or grey oak and rosewood high-gloss

finishes, which are all available at extra cost on request.

Sound quality

I remember heaving the even larger and heavier KEF Reference 1 standmounts (HFC 414) on to my long-suffering Slate Audio stands and, without any particular care in the setup let alone fine tuning, being mesmerised by the sense of scale, air and transparency I was experiencing within a few minutes of flopping back on the settee in my smaller listening room. Not so here. It takes a bit of experimenting with different amplifiers, cables and positioning before things really start to gel. And even then the Contour 20 sounds as if it needs a bigger stage to perform on, more space to breathe.

So, having finally settled on my reference electronics – Cyrus Xt Signature CD transport (HFC 386), Chord Hugo DAC (HFC 386) and ATC's CA-2/P1 pre-power amps (HFC 397), with a Townshend Audio wiring loom – I move the whole system into my larger listening room and, for the first time, the sound really starts to motor. What's most immediately impressive is the effortless way it fills the larger space with real bass authority, amply illustrated by the percussive resonance of Marcus Miller's *Rampage* from his classic 1993 album *The Sun Don't Lie*. Maybe it isn't so surprising given that part of the design brief for the new Contour was to achieve superior low-frequency response and less distortion at higher volumes. Even so, first impressions in the larger room are that the Contour 20 doesn't sound ▶

Curved cabinets and chamfered baffles give the Contour series a softer feel



Q&A

Roland Hoffman
Dynaudio Academy



DV: The Contour lineup clearly represents a major re-think. Why have you reverted to a conventional tweeter-on-top driver arrangement?

RH: Because it's exactly that: a re-think of a new Contour for 2017. We didn't start with 'the Contour always has the tweeter below the woofer' concept. Instead we started with a clear vision of the performance and a clear vision of a modern loudspeaker design. It's secondary whether we achieve the desired sound performance or sound radiation or phase alignment with a given principle. For example, with the Contour 20, the tweeter and mid/bass unit are so close together and therefore both effectively at ear-level axis that there is no strong advantage of an inverted arrangement.

Many of the Contour 20's price rivals use ribbon tweeters. What are the advantages of sticking with a dome tweeter?

If one only looks at single performance characteristics you'll find certain advantages in each tweeter design. Metal domes, ceramic domes, ribbon tweeters, even piezo tweeters all have particular advantages in one or two areas of performance. But first of all, to the human ear a tweeter only sounds right if the performance is consistent over the widest possible frequency range – in volume level, in on-axis/off-axis sound radiation, in phase, in tonality. Many tweeter's principles are good in some areas and quite poor in others, or only good at a limited frequency range. The coated soft dome principle like our advanced Esotar² is very consistent and extremely balanced over a wide frequency range. Second, it's not only the tweeter performance itself that counts. The tweeter also has to match the midrange/bass driver as closely as possible. They have to perform alike. No crossover filter in the world can make the wrong tweeter-woofer combination sound right. The coated dome tweeter is an ideal match to our midrange/bass driver. This is the key to an overall seamless performance.

IN SIGHT



- 1 28mm Esotar² soft dome tweeter
- 2 Bass reflex port
- 3 Speaker cable binding posts
- 4 180mm MSP mid/bass driver
- 5 Solid aluminium baffle

much like a standmount speaker at all, but neither is there a trace of the bloat and overhang that can afflict even talented floorstanders. The bass is agile, articulate and tuneful but also has the solidity and impetus to recreate the scale and reverberant characteristics of a venue.

Unlike the big KEF, it isn't an immediate impression of clarity, soundstage size and transparency that startles. The Contour 20 isn't a hi-fi first kind of speaker. If you notice

of energy and colour. It simply has a more generous and unfettered quality via the Contour 20 with greater dynamic reach and contrast than I am used to hearing. This is a speaker that successfully manages to capture the structure and timing of the performance in a supple, loose-limbed manner and, crucially, without the help of hyped emphasis or exaggeration. As we find time and again, it's this even-handed musicality and intelligibility that makes listening such an addictive experience.

Conclusion

While the Contour 20 isn't an especially easy speaker to get to know, it is most definitely worth the effort, especially if you fancy the idea of a quality standmount that can easily drive a large room with authority and a deep, taut bass combined with terrific musicality ●

What impresses most is the effortless way it fills larger spaces with bass

anything first it's the beautifully natural portrayal of tone and texture, a sense of balance and body that gives performers and instruments a real feeling of solidity in three dimensions. And if, to begin with, the presentation can seem just a hair short of laid back, the longer you listen the clearer it becomes so that what you're actually hearing is the absence of any artificial edge or hardness. There's lots of finely resolved detail through the midrange and treble, but the tweeter is so smooth and its integration with the midbass driver so seamless that it never conspicuously snags your attention.

Take John Mayer's duet with Herbie Hancock, *Stitched Up*. It's an entertaining track with plenty



HOW IT COMPARES

Stretching the budget a little is the £4,500 KEF Reference 1, a huge standmount that blew me away when I reviewed it in *HFC 414*, not just for its amazing transparency and resolution, but like the Contour 20, the ability to drive a large room to very high levels. The Dynaudio is a little livelier and has a winning way with tonal textures, but the KEF's presentation is larger and airier with greater soundstage depth. Although not strictly a standmount, ATC's £4,990 SMC19A (*HFC 413*) is more expensive but good value when you consider its built-in amplification. If it's studio-like accuracy and dynamics you crave, this should be at the very top of your list.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



LIKE: Fabulous build and finish; muscular and superbly musical sound

DISLIKE: Takes time to find its best game

WE SAY: A quality standmount that can stand toe-to-toe with many a fine floorstander